DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 460 232 UD 034 687

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TITLE School Leadership in a Market Setting: The Influence of Private Scholarships on Educational Leadership in Urban Schools. Policy Research Report.
INSTITUTION Indiana Univ., Bloomington. Education Policy Center.
SPONS AGENCY Smith Richardson Foundation, Inc., Greensboro, NC.; Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, Milwaukee, WI.; Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, Washington, DC.
REPORT NO RR-01-07
PUB DATE 2001-10-00
NOTE 34p.; Also supported by the Walton Family and D & D Foundations.
AVAILABLE FROM Indiana Education Policy Center, Smith Research Center, Suite 170, 2805 East Tenth Street, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Tel: 812-855-1240; Fax: 812-855-0240; Web site: http://www.indiana.edu/~iepc. For full text: http://www.indiana.edu/~iepc/PRINCIPALS.pdf.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Vouchers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Instructional Leadership; Principals; *Private Financial Support; Private Schools; Public Schools; *Scholarships; School Choice; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This study used qualitative methods to examine the influence of a privately funded scholarship program (PFSP) on strategic adaptations within urban pubic and private schools in a major metropolitan area. Interviews were conducted with principals during the base year before the introduction of the PFSP and in the first year of the scholarship program. Results revealed that public schools moved rapidly to develop distinctive school missions that provided market niches and choice for parents. Private schools worked to recruit low-income students and to influence program donors to give scholarships to low-income students already enrolled in private schools. Private schools began to explore ways of adapting curricula and services to meet the learning needs of more diverse students. However, public school administrators were caught in the middle, between the mandates of boards and central administrators and the resistance of teachers and the bureaucratic nature of the education system. This tension impeded their capacity to adapt to the new market-oriented environment. (Contains 28 references.) (SM)

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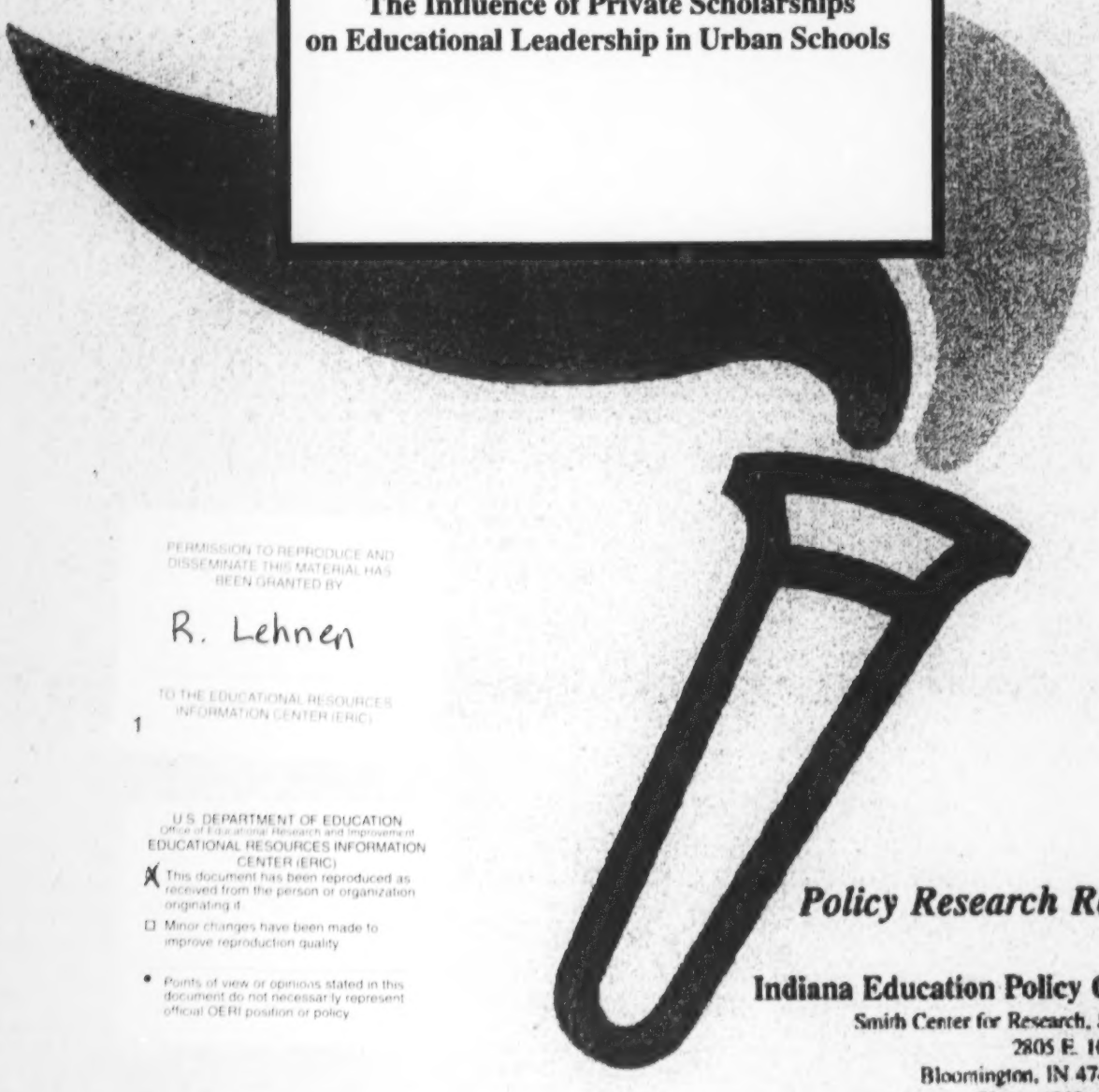

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UD034687

School Leadership in a Market Setting: The Influence of Private Scholarships on Educational Leadership in Urban Schools

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October 2001
Policy Research Report #01-07

Financial support from the Smith Richardson Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, D & D Foundation, Lynde & Harry Bradley Foundation, and Thomas B. Fordham Foundation is gratefully acknowledged. This paper presents the authors' interpretations and does not represent official policies or positions of funding agencies. The authors gratefully acknowledge contributions made to this study by researchers: Katie Kinnucan-Welsch, Will Place, Mary Anne Angel, Reva Cosby, Melva Cookie Newsom, Kelli Thomas, Jeff Wimer, and Connie Monroe; and Louise Moore, Principal, and the faculty and staff of Holy Angels School who graciously allowed us to conduct training and pilot studies in their school.

School Leadership in a Market Setting:
The Influence of Private Scholarships on Educational Leadership in Urban Schools

Abstract

While the current debate about the effects of vouchers focuses on the effects of private schools on achievement, too little research has examined how the introduction of need-based scholarships influenced change in school systems. This study uses a qualitative method to examine the influence of a privately funded scholarship program on strategic adaptations within urban public and private schools in a major metropolitan area. Interviews with site administrators in public and private schools revealed that public schools hastened movement toward development of distinctive school missions that provided market niches, while private schools that recruited low-income students began to explore ways of adapting curricula and services to meet the learning needs of more diverse students. However, public school administrators were caught in the middle, between the mandates of boards and central administrators and the resistance of teachers and the bureaucratic nature of the education system. This tension impeded their capacity to adapt to the new market-oriented environment.

Introduction

During the 1990s, private donors in several urban communities organized private scholarship programs that partially subsidized the costs of attending private schools for children with financial need, an innovation that can be described as a quasi-voucher experiment. Research on similar publicly funded experiments reveals that students who use vouchers to attend private schools have only modest improvement in achievement. However, these studies also indicate vouchers have a substantial impact on parent satisfaction (Metcalf, et al., 1998; Peterson, 1998; Witte, 1998). The more recent privately funded scholarship programs (PFSPs) provide need-based scholarships to low-income students to attend private schools in cities across the United States (New York, Washington, and other urban districts). Some of these new programs have even included experimental designs with control groups of students who applied for but did not receive private scholarships. While these experiments may provide further information about the differences in achievement in public and private schools, most of these new studies will not address questions related to the impact of these new market forces on educational improvement.

Research on the ways schools have adapted to the PFSPs is limited, but suggests that principals are caught between two forces: senior administrators who rapidly adapt to new conditions, and school communities that can become conflicted when too much change is introduced too quickly. Two recent studies have examined the school effects of PFSPs in The City, an urban community in the Midwest. The first examined how senior administrators in public and private school systems adapted their strategic plans to deal with the new scholarship. It found extensive change in educational strategies (St. John & Ridenour, in press). The second examined interviews with parents and teachers and found a favorable climate in private schools and a contested climate in public schools (Ridenour & St. John, in press). This study examines results of interviews conducted with principals during the base year (1997-98) before the PFSP was introduced and in the first year of the scholarship program (1998-99). This qualitative study provides a basis for examining the impact of the introduction of vouchers on leadership in urban public and private schools. First, we provide an overview of the context (The City and the PFSP), the conceptual

frames for the study, and the research method. Next, we examine the marketing and educational improvement strategies used by building administrators in four public and four private schools in The City. This analysis considers similarities and differences in the ways principals adapted the two types of school systems. Finally, the conclusions are presented.

Background

The Context

The PSFP program was a local intervention initiated by a noted advocate of school reform and a strong market advocate. The City, like many in the United States, had a history of declining achievement test scores and was subject to intense scrutiny by the state. It had a long history of court-mandated desegregation remedies and gained approval for a new choice-based approach to desegregation in 1998, the same year the PFSP was introduced. There was a strongly committed donor community in The City, which formed a Board to oversee the new PFSP. The members of the Board were not only the major contributors to the program, but they had a long history of commitment to educational improvement efforts in both the public and private schools.

The public schools in The City had initiated a number of reforms in the years immediately preceding the introduction of the PFSP. They had initiated a restructuring process in 1997 that focused on schools with the lowest test scores. This process included collaboration with representatives of one of the nationally recognized comprehensive reforms as well a team of faculty from a local university. In addition, The City had a long history of using magnet schools as an integral part of its desegregation strategy. The City Public Schools (CPS) had implemented several distinctive schools that were intended to induce student choice, including Montessori schools, values-based schools, direct instruction schools, and so forth. Thus the urban system was reasonably well positioned to respond to the introduction of private scholarships by emphasizing its own internal choices for families and competitive niches in several of its schools.

In addition, The City was located in a state with a history of providing direct financial support for private schools. This included support for busing, textbooks, and

supplemental services (i.e., Title I and Special Education). In an interview conducted as part of this study, the Superintendent of the Catholic school system indicated that Catholic schools attracted about $600 of state support for each new urban student, which meant that there was a financial incentive to expand enrollment of poor students. Senior administrators in The City Public Schools interviewed as part of this study viewed these subsidies of private schools as a "drain" of resources from public schools. In addition, there was pending litigation over the adequacy and equity of funding within the state system. Thus, there were a number of concerns about public and private school funding among public educators in The City even before the PFSP was introduced.

The private schools had also undergone substantial adaptation during the two years immediately preceding introduction of the PFSP. The Catholic schools had used two innovative methods to induce market forces into their system. This included a "fill every desk" campaign that had involved teachers in recruiting local students into their schools. This was accompanied by an "average cost funding" strategy that facilitated the sharing of resources across wealthy and poorer parishes. This combination of strategies had enabled several of the Catholic schools to attract large numbers of new students who were paying a reduced cost through the fill-every-desk initiative. A few of the Catholic schools in The City had become entirely African American as a result of these initiatives. In addition there was a large Christian school system in The City that had some school buildings with about half African American students. The Christian schools did not accept any state support, but they were willing to participate in the PFSP. Thus there was a large, proactive set of urban schools that was already oriented toward competing with CPS for students.

The experimental design for The City's PFSP included a "student-effects study" that was intended to have a treatment group of at least 675 students and a control group of equal size. However, the donor board had committed enough funds to the program to award more than a thousand scholarships. Thus, eligibility to the program was opened to students who were already attending private schools, along with public school students. Indeed, the private schools in the Lutheran and Catholic schools in The City had already made extensive use of student aid for students from poor inner-city families.

The original experimental design for the PFSP also included scholarships for students in public schools within the metropolitan area to attend public schools in other public districts in the area. Most of the districts already had a tuition scheme that allowed out-of-district students to pay the equivalent of local taxes per student. The public schools received the state portion of funding in addition to the tuition, which meant that there had long been an opportunity for urban students with money to pay to attend suburban schools. When the PFSP program was introduced, proponents encouraged the public districts in the metropolitan area to participate, thus approaching a more open market. Some donors even offered to pay the differential between the advertised scholarship amount ($1,000 to $1,500 depending on the level of school tuition) and the out-of-district tuition charge. However, all of the public districts in the metropolitan area refused to participate in this part of the program.

Given this contested context, it is perhaps not surprising that the PFSP ended up giving out many more scholarships than were intended, but induced less transfer than expected. Thus, a large number of the scholarships went to students who were already enrolled in private schools. Given that the number of students who changed their enrollment was smaller than expected, the experimental aspect of the study may not have been as critical as originally envisioned. However, there were substantial adaptations in the strategies used by both public and private educational systems, as a result of the PFSP. System administrators in both the public and private schools systems adapted their plans to compete better with the need scholarships programs (St. John & Ridenour, in press). The private schools more actively marketed to low-income families, and public schools developed educational strategies that promoted school choice, including an increased emphasis on creating distinctive schools and "choice zones."

Framing the Analysis

These developments raise the question for this inquiry: *How did the strategic adaptations by senior administrators in public and private systems influence the strategies used by building site administrators in public and private schools?* To address this question we focused on the ways principals and other site administrators adapted to rapid change in local finance and educational strategies. Our analyses of interviews

consider three possible ways of understanding local adaptations: a structural explanation, a market explanation, and a choice explanation.

Competing Explanations of Strategic Adaptation: The dominant model used for enrollment planning in schools and school systems is a structural model driven by historic enrollments and anticipated enrollment changes. Enrollment projections are typically adjusted for changes in the size of age cohorts and migration patterns across school districts (e.g., Hussar & Gerald, 1996). Within this structural way of conceiving of school choice, tax dollars are thought to follow students. Because state and local tax dollars follow students in public schools, planners can use enrollment as a basis for annual financial planning. When this model is used, it is possible that the threat of a large enrollment loss will stimulate school systems to adapt to the introduction of a scholarship program.

When this structural frame is used to critique vouchers and other choice schemes that enable students to choose public as well as private schools, then the focus shifts to assessing the consequences of losing students. The concept of skimming has frequently been used to describe these consequences, including: increased average cost per student remaining in the system due to the fact that families with children in higher cost programs (e.g., special education) are less likely to choose to take advantage of vouchers; and a reduction of average scores in public schools due to the fact that higher-achieving children are more likely to take advantage of private school choice opportunities (Kozol, 1992). Those who hold structural beliefs would have a rationale for resisting choice proposals, especially proposals that include private schools. Analyses thus far have found that public school teachers hold this structural view of school choice and remain resistant to these policies (Ridenour & St. John, in press).

Second, a market model has emerged in the school literature. This model argues both that parents deserve to have choices about schools and that school innovation will be influenced by the introduction of market forces (Chubb & Moe, 1990, 1991; Glen, 1991). School choice has gained substantial public support (Rose, Gallup & Elam, 1997). In fact, many public school advocates have adapted to the market argument by advocating school choice within public school systems. However, the limited choice model

advocated by public school proponents puts more constraints on family school choice and competition for students, forces that could influence market adaptations. The more limited model constrains choice to public schools, or at least to schools chartered by public authorities. It also limits market adaptations to schools that are eligible to receive students. Regardless of whether the full-market model or more limited, public-school-market model is advocated, the underlying logic of this approach is that family choice is a force that can influence change in schools.

When market assumptions are used in critiques of school choice proposals, the counter arguments are more likely to focus on whether all students can really afford to take advantage of scholarship subsidies. There also may be concerns when scholarships cover only a portion of the costs of attending private schools. Further, even if scholarships cover full tuition, there are other costs associated with attendance and, thus, the poorest students would not be able to take advantage of choice schemes; they would be left in inner-city schools of deteriorating quality. Thus, the market critique is similar to the structural, skimming critique. Analyses to date indicate that system leaders in private schools held this view and the system administrators in the inner city public school system rapidly adapted to this new environment (St. John & Ridenour, in press).

A third explanation could be used to examine the adaptation of school administrators to respond to market incentives based on their predisposition. This perspective is based on research on financial and academic adaptations in higher education (e.g., St. John, 1994, 1995; St. John & Elliott, 1994; St. John & Hossler, 1998) and on schools that implemented comprehensive reforms (Finnan, St. John, Slovcek, & McCarthy, 1996; St. John, Griffith, & Allen-Haynes, 1997). This framework focuses on how individuals in different "situated" circumstances respond to incentives (St. John, Asker, & Hu, in press). It focuses on discerning how: students and their families respond to prices and price subsidies; administrators and educators respond to new competitive forces; and schools respond to financial incentives, based on their missions and shared values. Thus, the choice perspective incorporates the salient arguments of the structural and market claims, but it also incorporates a way of considering how and why

individuals' circumstances, including their values and beliefs, can influence their response to new incentives.

Thus, the third perspective also provides a way of integrating our analysis of changes in planning and managerial processes with an interpretive analysis of the professional behavior by educators and the choice preferences of families. By focusing on the ways senior administrators, educators, and parents respond to the new program, it is possible to discern better the influence the new program has on educational improvement processes. And, at the same time, by focusing on the circumstances that influence choices and actions, we have a way of discerning patterns of beliefs—i.e., the attitudes towards vouchers and markets held by the various participants—and how these beliefs influence the ways participants respond to the introduction of the program. A few of the senior school administrators who adapted their perspectives to contend with the new environment shifted to a choice view, adjusting to the principle that families should have choices (St. John & Ri¢enour, in press). The changing attitudes among some of the senior education leaders in The City were related to: the experience of public school administrators with the creation of choice zones as a school desegregation strategy; and the experience of senior leaders in Catholic schools with the strategic use of scholarships for low-income children in The City. These few administrators had already begun to rethink the meaning of choice from the perspective of families, rather than holding to institutionally-centered views.

Focus on System Adaptation by Principals: This paper focuses on the strategies building-level administrators used to communicate with parents and promote educational improvement. We consider how schools changed as a consequence of introducing private scholarships into an urban school system. To build an understanding of the change process, we conducted interviews and observations in a school during a two-year period: the base year during which the PFSP was introduced (1997-98) and the first year of implementation (1998-99). While the comparison of interviews across the two years revealed substantial continuity within the schools, there were also patterns of adaptation. In this report we concentrated on the second year interviews as a means of building an

understanding of the ways schools—both public and private—adapted to the new market environment.

Research Approach

We wanted to examine schools holistically and uncover the dynamics of change as revealed naturally by the voices of those in the schools, revelations that we could not anticipate. Therefore, we used a qualitative research approach. Interviews and observations were our predominant data collection strategies.

Identifying schools as sites for study was based on several factors: those schools parents would or would not want to leave based on prior information and shifting enrollment patterns; those schools into which we would be given access; and lastly, our interest in schools that had relatively high and low numbers of PFSP applicants and that could be matched on an instructional theme. We were interested in exploring whether or not differences might exist among those schools from which a relatively large proportion of parents would want to withdraw their children and those schools where fewer parents would demonstrate such a desire. There was, therefore, much negotiation in identifying sites for study. Several face-to-face meetings between school administrators and the research team built a foundation of reciprocity on which the first year of the study was begun (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). All findings, for example, would be shared with the schools before they were sent to other audiences. Access to building sites, dates of data collection at individual schools, and all other logistical matters were agreed to by the schools and the university team. Informed consent procedures were put in place.

In the baseline year (1997-1998), eight schools were sites for study, four public schools and four private schools. In the second year of the study (1998-1999), two public schools were added. Because the baseline year was based on "applications" and the second year was based on "takers," it was impossible in the baseline year to predict from which schools applicants would be selected by the lottery. For the baseline study, two City Elementary Schools with (in March 1998) high numbers of applicants (N=48 or 7.9% and N=44 or 6.8%) were selected as well as two City Elementary Schools with low application numbers (N=11 or 3.0% and N=17 or 4.0%). The two City Schools with low application numbers were selected to match instructional themes of the two City Schools

with high application numbers. Four private schools were selected based on two criteria. The first was selecting schools that historically have attracted high numbers of low-income students in the area of The City. The second criterion was selecting schools that expressed the intent to actively recruit PFSP students.

In the second year, the same four private schools were studied, but there were six public schools studied. To the original four CPS, two additional City schools were added that had two of the highest proportions of scholarship recipients and "takers:" 2.3% and 3.1% of their enrolled students left with the PFSP. A third, one of the original City case schools, had a substantial proportion of "takers:" 1.2%. According to Armor and Peiser (1998), in Massachusetts, school change resulted when an excess of 2% of a school population left; thus, our second year selection of schools to study was justified. The bulk of the interpretation in this paper (all the data other than the senior level administrators) is based on these schools during the second year, the year when any impact would likely take place.

Two intense periods of data collection characterized the first year of the study. First, senior level administrators were queried in face-to-face interviews in late fall 1997 and early winter 1998 at the earliest stages of the PFSP's publicity. The second period was when school-based researchers spent between 1 and 3 weeks in each of the eight schools during spring 1998, with each researcher exclusively focusing on the schools he/she was studying.

The second year of the study was the year following the awarding of the scholarships (i.e., families had exercised their choices). Our total number of case study schools in the two years, then, was ten, as is shown in the following figure. The data collection strategies in year two paralleled the year one procedures: general observations, interviews, and systematic classroom observations (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Fetterman, 1989). Data collection involving senior level administrators in year one is discussed in the next section, followed by a discussion of the school level data collection.

Figure 1. School Sites by PFSP Participant Proportions and Year

	Public Schools			Private Schools
	Years 1 & 2 High % Applications	Years 1 & 2 Low % Applications	Year 2 High % "Takers"	Years 1 & 2
Johnson	x			
Frazer		x		
Redford	x			
Walton		x		
Embassy			x	
Foster			x	
Charles Park				x
Deer Creek				x
Hayes Hill				x
Rose Lane				x

Between May and June 1998, four researchers spent between one and three weeks on-site in the eight schools. In year two, four researchers carried out the same procedures but were on-site for a longer period of time, usually over four or five weeks during winter-spring 1999. One constraint during year one was the short period of time between the announcement of the PFSP program and the end of the school year, which limited the duration of possible time spent in the schools.

Throughout the research team discussions of spring and fall 1998, the research team worked under the assumption proffered by Guba & Lincoln (1981) that they had not captured the culture of the school in all its complexities and layers; instead the data "masquerade[d] as a whole when in fact they are but a part - a slice of life" (p. 377). The brief time span on-site was augmented with planning meetings with principals and group debriefing meetings before, during, and following the data collection period.

Researchers were not so intimately involved as members of their respective school settings that they could adopt the insider perspective on school life. As peripheral agents to the schools they studied, they did not actively engage as members of the school family but instead interacted closely enough to enable them to make valid meaning about school culture, a role Adler and Adler (1994) would label as "peripheral member."

On-site, the researchers collected several kinds of data. First of all, they completed statistical profiles of each building, including demography, curriculum descriptions, and school environment variables. Secondly, they interviewed the principal and a sample of teachers and parents (Spradley, 1979). A limitation to interpreting the findings is the fact that the teachers and the parents who were interviewed were those selected by the principal. In this paper we analyze the interviews with principals along with the interviews of senior administrators.

An interpretive stance to interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) would best characterize the research team's strategy. Actively participating in the interview, the researchers attempted to evoke meaning not in isolation but within a context. In other words, as "accounts," the researchers invited these interviews as socially meaningful text (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Each informant was offered a pseudonym and almost all interviews were tape-recorded. Transcripts were prepared. Each informant was sent his/her typed interview transcript so that changes, if any, might be made in order to record each one's ideas and attitudes about the schools in the most valid way.

Change in Building Level Strategy

How did the strategic adaptations made by senior administrators in public and private school systems influence the strategies used by building site administrators in public and private schools? In The City, senior administrators made rapid adaptations to the PFSP, encouraging site administrators to adopt competitive strategies. Below we examine how building-level administrators adapted to the new policy context.

Public and private schools in urban settings face fundamentally different challenges with the introduction of PFSP scholarships. The linkages between planning by central administrators and the actual practice of building administrators are often characterized as weak or loosely coupled in public school systems. This relationship is especially complicated in urban school systems, where central administrators are increasingly being held responsible for the outcomes of schools—especially the test scores of students—but building-level educators are forced to deal with complex issues on a day-to-day basis that make it difficult to influence change. In this study we

examined public schools that were expected to lose students to the PFSP, and public schools that actually lost students to the PFSP. By studying changes in these schools, we focused on the ways practices evolved in the schools. In contrast, private schools have historically been somewhat immune to the most serious problems associated with urban poverty. However, the introduction of scholarships could change this context. Specifically, most private schools in The City, as in most other urban communities, have distinctive missions. However, as they adapt to compete for more students who bring scholarships with them into schools, they, too, face choices about whether to develop a different competitive strategy.

While we identified patterns of adaptation in schools, these patterns were situated within school contexts that were somewhat resistant to change. Both the public and private schools in The City had several years of experience with choice schemes before the introduction of PFSP. Some of the recent emphasis on school choice was a reaction to desegregation mandates and funding crises. They, therefore, had begun the process of adaptations we describe here prior to the PFSP. The patterns that we discuss were hastened by the introduction of the new choice program.

Communicating with Parents

One of the most striking features of the interviews with principals and teachers in public and private schools in The City was that in both sets of schools, parent involvement was in decline. The increasing numbers of families in which both parents worked outside the home, and the increasing numbers of families with a single parent, were among the explanations for this steady decline in both public and private schools. Both school types (public and private) had a variety of mechanisms in place to increase parent involvement, but the private schools seemed to yield more positive results from employing these strategies. For example, in public schools, Title I funding required organized parent participation, support personnel in a variety of roles to deal with special needs, parent resource rooms, after-school programs for parents, take-home laptop computers and software, monthly newsletters, proficiency test workshops for parents, and parenting skill workshops. However, it was clear that private schools, for the most part, seemed to have greater success in getting parents involved. They were able to rely on

both coerced and voluntary parent participation, neither of which was possible or evident in public schools. At one private school, for instance, parents were required to contribute a certain amount of time each month. Private schools also were more likely to have available the names, addresses, and phone numbers of parents so that teachers could contact parents regularly. The increased likelihood of parent contact in private schools allowed those administrators to depend on the social grapevine and word-of-mouth with parents, relatives, and friend as a communication medium.

Private Schools Communicated Directly With Parents: Most urban private schools have historically placed an emphasis on marketing to parents in their service communities, which are often defined by the boundaries of religious communities. However, with the changes in the urban populations, some urban Catholic schools have been challenged by the decline in middle-class, inner-city Catholic families. Three of the schools we examined as case studies were schools that had made substantial changes in their marketing over the two years prior to PFSP, as a result of fill-every-desk and average-cost-funding strategies.

Rose Lane School attracted 51 new PFSP students for 1998-99. This parish school was exclusively African American even before the new program. The implementation of the private scholarship program provided an opportunity to strengthen the emphasis on marketing directly to parents. When asked about the strategy they used to attract new students, the Rose Lane principal commented: *"We had teachers involved, had them calling the students that were already in class and [to] see what their intentions were, so we would know how many seats we had available."* Thus, they started their new competitive strategy by building an understanding of the space that was open. She also commented, *"I try to be productive so that our parents could go out and talk and beef up [the story] for us."* She continued, *"So basically it's by word of mouth."*

Deer Creek, another Catholic school, was a four-parish Catholic school that was entirely African American. Deer Creek had 42 current students who received PFSP scholarships as well as 22 new recruits with the scholarships. The principal and the teachers had actively recruited neighborhood students over the past several years, which led to greater involvement. Over time, the Deer Creek principal had reflected a great deal

on strategies for working directly with parents. In the interview she reflected: *"You've got to redefine involvement. I would define involvement as someone who cares about their child, cares about how they are learning, how they are physically, and also works cooperatively with teachers."* She indicated that communication between teachers and parents was the most direct concern for and her teachers. She also commented that parents frequently were involved in reading to children.

A third Catholic school, Hayes Hill School, had successfully recruited 25 PFSP students, but had few already-enrolled students who qualified. The principal characterized the school as *"a very warm, loving environment for students. I want people to feel welcome."* The school's marketing position was changing. She observed: *"Some people would say, 'Well, we don't have a choice because we're Catholic, we belong to this parish, our kids will go to this school.' I'm talking about years, and years, and years ago."* The school made an effort to reach out to students in the new market environment. *"There were things on the radio . . . and then we've . . . done mailings to people in particular zip codes. We've walked the neighborhood and passed out things."*

For Charles Park School, the Christian case study school, religion was the primary issue of concern in marketing to and communicating with parents. The school had 34 new PFSP recruits and 100 already enrolled students with scholarships. The principal described how he dealt with potential new PFSP scholars: *"This summer we had a number who [were] encouraged by PFSP to 'shop around,' that's the term they used, and see what the different programs are, and they made applications."* However, many of these shoppers were not admitted. *"They really didn't hold to what we believe in, but they were shopping around and so we went through the whole process with them and then came to a point where they really, really didn't fit what we wanted and what they wanted."* School leaders communicated with parents about their religious philosophy, as a means of making admissions choices.

Thus, the private schools had established patterns of marketing directly to families. The original locus of this activity, at least for the four religious schools we studied, was from within the faith community. However, as the nature of the local parish communities changed, these three Catholic schools adapted their strategies, adopting a

more direct outreach approach. Site administrators in these schools began to focus on communicating with parents and caring for children. In contrast, the Christian school continued to use the older faith-based approach to recruiting and had more difficulty adapting to the new "shopping around" phenomenon. Thus, the ways private schools adapted to choice was influenced by their histories. Schools that had previously experienced an enrollment decline were more likely to adopt an active recruitment strategy involving neighborhood outreach, while schools that were still in demand from their traditional faith communities continued to rely on faith as a central concern in recruiting and admissions.

Public Schools Adopted a Centralized Marketing Strategy: The public system made an effort to keep students, as was evident from the interviews with administrators during the first year of the study. In addition, the Superintendent actually requested the list of PFSP applicants so they could be sent information on choices in the public system.[1] This process involved exerting pressure on schools to retain students. One public school principal observed, *"I think that they've indoctrinated us . . . (saying) 'Do what you can to keep people here.' So I don't find 'em leaving to go to PFSP schools. I find a lot leaving to go to other districts, but not to PFSP."* This comment reveals an embattled attitude, indicating it is better to lose students to other public schools than to private schools.

The two Montessori schools included in the study had no students who took PFSP scholarships, although several parents had applied and had the option. The principal in one of these schools objected to the new market forces because it had a distinctive mission: *"I would like to be known in the community as the school where everybody wants to come."* He continued, *"I think we're on that [list] because they have lists for Montessori and they, people, are still trying to come from other Montessori's here."* More generally, he was aware that parents had become more important in the system as a whole: *"What they're pushing in The City Public Schools now is [to] get everybody up to snuff providing what parents really want, but they want more parent involvement, to tell 'em what they want. The parents aren't doing that, so we are; we are designing what is*

1 The study team did not provide this information, nor did the research team maintain these records.

best for kids." These comments illustrate that he viewed the issue as a system problem that required a system response.

The second Montessori principal was also critical of the new politics that led to the scholarship scheme in The City. However, he observed that the new competitive environment had advantages to parents. Regarding the new competitive environment, he observed: *"I think with choice you also match up learning styles with teaching styles and instructional styles."* He felt the new environment had advantages for parents:

> *I think it's better for parents. Parents know their children as well as anybody. They know them better in most cases . . . than we do as educators. So they can match up the curriculum or the course offerings or the instruction theme of their school with their child's learning style, and I think that's the correct way to use it.*

He continued:

> *I think some parents are well aware [and] some aren't so aware. We want all parents to know what we offer here . . . and what's offered in our district so that they can make the most logical, most informed choice for them to find one [a school].*

When asked about how parents could learn about what schools had to offer, he observed: *"There [are] brochures offered by the district, there [are] brochures offered by the schools. Parents are welcome to our school; parents are welcomed into schools across the district."*

The principal of Embassy School, a direct-instruction public school that had lost 13 students to PFSP (about 3% of the students), indicated that the challenge was to communicate with parents about the school. However, she cautioned the student might not always get his/her choice.

> *It means that parents have an opportunity to decide if this is something that they would like their children to be part of. Now, keeping well in mind, even with City Public Schools when you say school choice, when they go to the central education [office] to register they list three choices and they do anything they can to honor those choices.*

However, the request illustrates the competitive orientation in CPS.

The fourth public school, Redford, lost 9 students to PFSP scholarships. The school had been struggling to retain students when faced with competition within the public system. When asked about how they planned to market for students, the principal commented: *"We market . . . through the Central Registration. There's a book that parents get, at least in the past they have gotten it, and they got it this year. It is given to kindergarten parents mainly."* When asked "What do you think about school choice, real choice?" she responded:

> *I think children should have a choice . . . I certainly do. I mean if they're . . . interested in the arts, then they should be able to go for the arts. If they're interested in a traditional school as we are, they have that choice.*

Thus, within The City Public Schools there was an increasing emphasis on family choice. However, choice was treated as a centralized process and building-level administrators did not get directly involved in marketing to students and their families. This was in major contrast to private schools where the marketing relationship between parents was established with the school building, rather than with the school system.

School building size also relates closely to success in parent communications. In our study, the public schools were, as a group, larger in enrollment (N from 350 to 600+ students) than were the private schools (N below 270 in all schools). The private schools operated with the advantage of more intimate parent contact due to size alone.

Strengthening Market Niches

When market forces are introduced in school systems, individual schools need to establish a distinctive identity that helps them communicate with families. From our analysis of eight schools it is apparent that this process of establishing a market niche was a recurring issue. However, the form these market niches, or distinctive missions, took was a product of the history of the schools and only marginally influenced by the introduction of private scholarships.

Increasing Responsiveness in Private Schools: While urban private schools have historically placed an emphasis on marketing to parents in the parish, urban Catholic schools have been challenged by the decline in middle-class, inner-city Catholic families.

This new pressure of responding to the distinctive needs of poor children from the inner city introduced new challenges into urban private schools.

Of the four schools we studied, Deer Creek had done the most to adapt to the new urban market. As the principal put it: *"We'll try to service anybody unless I talk to a parent and get the feeling they have needs that we can't meet. We don't have full services. We don't have the full-time services . . . [for] a kid with severe behavior problems. We tried it."* However, they have taken students with much more diverse needs than they had previously experienced in their classrooms. She commented, *"We've kind of played around, to try to get a full-time counselor because some of these kids need counseling. They need family counseling, they need it if it is on site or close."*

In Rose Lane School, the adaptation took the form of individualizing. The principal commented that teachers *"have to look at the needs of all of these students and teach from that need."* She continued, *"And it's holistic, you know, you're not just teaching Johnny to read and write, you are teaching morals and values here, so that when they go out they'll know how to deal with some things and some situations."* This linkage between the focus on the individual and the deeper mission of the school was also evident in her comments about teachers. She observed:

> *I have a teacher who was in The City Public Schools and is now working on our staff. She felt that God had placed her here for a reason and that she's fulfilled His purpose in life. So I think you know I'm not speaking for all or everybody, but I know my teachers are here and that they are really dedicated. They can go anywhere.*

Hayes Hill School had also maintained a neighborhood focus, which helped to build the sense of community in the school. The principal commented:

> *The teachers are good . . . they know the families, they know the kids, most of them come from the neighborhood. The teachers see them before school, after school. Like I said, they really take care of the kids.*

The efforts to change the school have been constrained in part because of this neighborhood context: *"The Appalachian community is not very trusting or welcoming."*

Indeed, she observed: *"I just know that we're losing some black kids because we're all white."*

Charles Park School had made some adaptations to the urban environment before PFSP, but it had maintained its historic mission. Many of the scholarship recipients were from within the school: *"A large number of the PFSP students were already within the school."* The principal observed, *"Our campus is probably the most diverse of all the other elementary campuses. Most, I'd say half of our students are from The City . . . and the other half [are] from nearby suburbs."* However, the school maintained its commitment to a basic Christian focus: *"This is a Christian school and it's a ministry. We're not related to one church, but we have many churches involved in the system."* Later he commented, *"We maintain the regular curriculum, except we use Christian textbooks, home school textbooks. So the spiritual, moral development of the students is our goal."*

However, the opening of the doors did cause some difficulties for Charles Park, some because of faith and others because of discipline. *"We had three or four, at least, who came in . . . and I'm not really sure the parents knew how strong our commitments were to Biblical principles and all."* He indicated that the school would ask these children *"to leave basically on discipline issues."*

The four private schools we studied were among the inner-city private schools that were most receptive to recruiting PFSP students. It is clear from the interviews that marketing to scholarship students not only meant building a different pattern of relationships with parents, but it also meant making adaptations in the school. It meant developing ways of responding to students with more diverse needs and this need put pressures on schools to think about the services they could provide their students.

Public Schools Develop Distinctive Missions: In the public schools, the PFSP challenge created a need to think differently about their competitive environment. One site administrator from a Montessori school indicated that they had begun to compare where the school stood within the new context. In the older environment it was sufficient to have a distinctive mission*: "Before we didn't care where we were, we knew we wanted to do what Montessori was all about and in the end we'd produce citizens."* Faced with

competition from outside the system, they decided to emphasize their mission, rather than the test scores, which were a source of agony: *"Here . . . even if test scores weren't as high, I think Montessori had sold itself. I don't know the scores . . . here, because the teachers constantly preach that the score doesn't mean anything."* When asked about what might happen if they became a charter school, he argued: *"They'd [the teachers] work harder . . . and we would want better scores and more parent help."*

The second Montessori school had adapted this methodology to deal more directly with the pressures of achievement tests. The principal observed the need to blend the Montessori philosophy with the appropriate emphasis on standardized tests: *"So while we are doing our . . . curriculum and instruction in the Montessori philosophy, we also realize that we are covering state proficiency outcomes and objectives. And we have to make sure that all [of] the state's proficiency tests' outcomes and objectives are covered in our curriculum."* Indeed, he realized that while Montessori had strengths, it might not meet the needs of all of their students: *"I don't think that there's a cookbook to education. I think Montessori is going to be wonderful for some kids. I think direct instruction is going to be better for other kids."*

At Embassy School, the Title I school-wide process helped the school to develop a distinctive mission. They were moving in the direction of being a full-service school using direct instruction. One element of the strategy has been to integrate a focus on social work and community development.

> *One of our identified needs is that we do need a social worker. And we're a Title I school-wide building. We're in the late process . . . of finalizing what we need to do to make that occur. And that information, say that we needed a social worker, was based on attendance. It's based on discipline. It's based on suspension referrals.*

She also described how the school had made it clear that they wanted to maintain a focus on direct instruction (DI) when she was hired:

> *One of the things I had to convey to the staff is that they knew that I came from a building that was not a DI school. And I had to convey to them, I'm not coming to throw DI out the window. I couldn't anyway. This is a curriculum commitment*

The City Public Schools made. We have some buildings that are DI, some that are Success for All, some buildings that have Montessori. So administrators don't come in and throw out a particular curriculum.

In contrast, Redford School had not yet developed a distinctive mission, but was in near chaos at the time of the first-year interview. The principal observed: *"The parents blame the teachers, the teachers blame the parents, the teachers blame the administrators, the administrators blame the administrators over them."* She also reflected: *"Teachers are asked to do much, much more. They're very needy children [who] come to us. From kindergarten, the children are demanding . . . they [the teachers] hug them, they hold them, just [to] be loving to them."* She continued:

So, those are the kinds of things that we have to do. Teachers have to do. Our social worker tutors children. She has a session after school. It seems that everybody is working feverishly to help the children succeed. We're staying late, we're coming early to get them what they need. It's not all of the children. Many of our children have great support from their parents and their families. But there are some very needy ones.

The sense of chaos continued to grow at Redford. In response to a district request, a K-2 building in a two-building campus was converted to a charter school in July 1998. However, the struggle to deal with the growing needs at Redford continued, exacerbated by a financial crisis in the system during spring 1999. In February 2000, a decision by the Board of Education to "close" Redford (along with 3 other elementary schools) was amended by the desire to convert the remaining grades into another charter school.

Thus, the challenge facing urban public schools varies in different types of school settings. In the new choice environment, there is an increased focus on developing a building-level mission, or market niche, but there is also a need to respond to the learning and developmental needs of often high-need children. The movement toward creating distinctive niches was hastened by the creation of the PFSP, given the emphasis on retaining children and providing more choices for families, but the challenges facing educators in The City Public Schools were no less severe.

Understanding the Complexity of Educational Improvement

Both public and private schools in The City are facing serious educational challenges, if not new opportunities, as a result of the new PSFP program. Below, we briefly explore how three perspectives can inform an understanding of this change process.

First, the structural view of the public educational system argues that the quality of public schools can be further reduced by the introduction of choice schemes, especially if those schemes include private schools. There is evidence to support this line of argument from the school cases. Specifically, it is apparent that private schools can deny students who do not fit and that students with the most serious problems are more likely to be left in urban schools. However there is also evidence that falls outside of the narrow interpretive lens. This evidence includes:

- There was a great deal of variation of responses within the public system. Some of the schools with well-developed missions, or educational niches, are relatively immune to the new market forces. There is a high demand for the services of these schools and they are not threatened by the loss of students. Other schools in the public system struggle to find a competitive market niche and are faced with the challenge of finding ways of responding to the educational needs of children with serious problems.
- The total number of students who left the public schools was relatively small and may have placed less additional pressure on the most troubled schools than did the introduction of an increased emphasis on choice within The City Public Schools.
- While some of the private schools increased their marketing efforts when the new scholarship program was introduced, they received the greatest benefit from the program as a source of financial support for currently enrolled students.
- Private schools began to open their doors to students with more diverse learning needs, which meant that they needed to explore ways of providing a more complete range of services.

Second, the market view also provides a way of explaining the attempts to change educational practice. Indeed, this view helps explain the rapid adaptation made in both

public and private school systems in The City (St. John & Ridenour, in press). However, the market view may be less compelling when it is applied at the school level than it was when applied at the system level. In particular, it is apparent the schools adapted slowly to the new plans developed by senior administrators. It was easier for both public and private schools to adapt if they were already predisposed toward the change. For example, the Catholic schools that had already made a transition to marketing to more economically diverse clients found it easier to continue to make these changes. Indeed, all of the private schools we studied were predisposed toward opening their doors. And the public schools that had histories of distinctiveness or that were already developing distinctive missions found it easier to adapt to The City Public Schools' new choice scheme than did the school that defined itself as being traditional.

Finally, the alternative choice perspective provides a potentially richer way of explaining the developments in the system. According to this perspective, educators make choices based on their values, beliefs, and experiences, the situated contexts in which they act. Certainly this would seem to explain the patterns observed:

- *Responses within the public system varied widely from setting to setting.* The different school contexts help explain why some schools faced few new challenges from the introduction of choice, while others were confronted with the need to develop more distinctive missions.
- *A relatively small number of students left the public schools.* Clearly there had been efforts to introduce market forces both from within The City Public Schools and from within the private school systems before the new choice scheme was introduced. Thus, most educators were adapting from a previously established position or point of view. The introduction of the privately funded scholarship program did little to change the perceptions of the site administrators interviewed.
- *Private schools received the greatest benefits from the program as a source of financial support for currently enrolled students.* Given that the most actively involved private schools had been predisposed to competing for high-need students for several years before the new program, they had students enrolled who were qualified. Thus, the PFSP had less influence as a force moving students from public

to private schools than it did as a force that strengthened the funding base for private schools that had previously take this step.

- *Private schools needed to explore ways of providing a more complete range of services.* Given that the PFSP provided funds for low-income children to attend private schools, the decision to accept scholarship recipients carried with it an obligation to respond to the needs of more economically diverse students.

Conclusions

Families, schools, and school systems adapt to market strategies. This conclusion is evident from the review of interviews with central administrators, reform advocates, school administrators, teachers, and parents. Below, we briefly summarize the major conclusions reached from this review.

Complex Patterns of Adaptation

Examining the strategic adaptations at three levels within urban educational systems has provided insight into the complexity of system adaptation to the new market forces in education. First, the most rapid changes were evident at the system level. Once briefed on the new privately funded scholarship program, senior administrators began to adapt both the educational and financial strategies used in their systems. The public schools hastened movement toward an emphasis on choice within the public school system. Pressure was placed on schools to develop distinctive missions that offered choices for parents. Retaining both students and public funding that followed students was the primary incentive for hastening the adaptation process. However, this did not represent a radical departure from past practices, but rather the PFSP provided an incentive to speed up this change process.

In the four private schools there were efforts to attract new students, as well as efforts to influence program donors to give scholarships to the low-income students who were already enrolled in private schools. This early adaptation in the design of the program substantially reduced the research controls for the student effects study. This compromise in the design of the program increased the local impact of the program, as it had a more direct and substantial influence on the financial well-being of the private

schools that had already begun to recruit inner-city poor students. However, the introduction of the PFSP did not have the broad impact that was originally intended. It did not influence suburban schools to open their doors to urban students, nor did it substantially expand the range of private schools that marketed to poor urban children.

Second, the program also hastened changes in the marketing and educational strategies that urban schools used. Building-level administrators in the urban private schools that actively participated in the program not only became more active in recruiting students, they also reflected on the need to provide a more complete range of services to the new children in their schools. However, this pattern of change was hastened by the fact that PFSP increased the number of high-need students these schools attracted; but in three of four private schools we studied, the majority of PFSP recipients were already enrolled in the schools. In other words, administrators in these schools were reflecting on the need for change as a result of a historic pattern of change, rather than as a direct result of the new program.

Third, in contrast, public schools were already confronted by the need to respond to the full range of needs of urban children. The two schools we studied that lost moderate numbers of students to PFSP were both schools with social workers who were an integral part of the educational program. These schools were also confronted by the challenge to develop a more distinctive mission. One of these schools was attempting to strengthen the emphasis it placed on direct instruction, the other was wrestling with the prospect of becoming a "charter" school. The other two schools we studied had well-developed and distinctive missions. Understanding the Influence of Scholarships

Underlying the questions addressed in this study lies a complex set of issues concerning the meaning of educational improvement. If educational improvement is reduced to the measurement of test scores for children who change from public to private schools, then it is possible that this experiment will result in small gains, the usual finding. However, there is also evidence that increasing choice increases learning opportunities for some children. If inducing a few students to cross the boundaries from a constrained set of public schools to a constrained set of private schools is considered improvement in educational outcomes, then the schools had an impact. But this does not

solve the problem facing urban schools. Certainly urban educators feel the pressure to improve test scores and this pressure was increased by the PFSP. However, whether this new set of incentives actually can influence improvement in test scores in some schools will remain an open question. Even if test scores improved in some of the highly impacted schools, it would be difficult to discern the cause. Further, if the question is, "Has the introduction of market forces improved learning opportunities for urban children?" then an answer would be especially hard to ascertain. Further studies of change processes in public and private schools impacted by PFSPs are needed to build an understanding of the consequences of this new turn in education politics.

The rapid movement to school choice schemes, such as the privately funded scholarship program in The City, represents an important area of study with respect to school leadership and educational policy. One view of policy argues that systematic policy changes can influence school improvement, a view that seems consonant with the school improvement strategies being used in standards and testing. Like the standards and testing movement, the responses to the PSFP in The City were framed centrally and school leaders were left to adapt as best they could. In this case, we found that public school leaders did try to adapt, but they came into conflict with constraints created by school testing and other centrally mandated reforms.

Another view of school reforms argues that the most meaningful reforms are locally initiated (First, Curcio, & Young, 1994). The current efforts to promote comprehensive school reform seem to hold this premise and seem to have a chance of improving some urban schools (St. John, Manset, Chung, Simmons, Loescher, Hossler, & Gordon, in press). Senior administrators in The City Public Schools encouraged site administrators to initiate responses that had these characteristics, including placing an emphasis on developing market niches. However, there were many impediments facing school leaders who tried to seize this opportunity. For example, the centralization of marketing in The City Public Schools made it difficult for them to communicate about their niches to parents, just as the testing system made it difficult for teachers to realize the potential of their new niche strategy. Thus, there continue to be many impediments to

the implementation of market strategies in urban schools, which means that the introduction of scholarships can make the lives of school leaders even more difficult.

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